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ABSTRACT

This teacher's packet accompanies a slide presentation on the wishes and riddles found in myths and rebuses in Chinese art. The packet contains: (1) an introductory essay describing symbolism used in the art of various dynasties of China; (2) a slide list describing the art depicted on each slide with time period and dimensions of the piece; (3) a picture of a silk tapestry the "Peach Banquet" with a description of the gods represented on the tapestry ; (4) a listing of suggested activities using puns and rebuses to investigate symbolism; (5) a listing of rebuses and figures with other symbolism found in the slides; and (6) a 32-item bibliography of resources on Chinese symbols and myths. (EH)

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Wishes and Riddles:
Symbolic Imagery in Chinese Art

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese art abounds in symbolism. Throughout the culture, images and objects are brought together not just for aesthetic purposes but also for their symbolic association and content. Landscape paintings may not only represent particular places at particular moments but also symbolically combine mountains and water, or *yang* and *yin*, making a philosophical statement about the interaction of the primary forces that create the universe. A Chinese garden will also be composed of rocks and water with carefully placed trees and flowers which are as important for their symbolic associations -- the evergreen pine for constancy and longevity and luxuriant peonies representing wealth and rank -- as for their horticultural and aesthetic value. In everyday life utilitarian objects and articles of clothing will be decorated with auspicious symbols.

Focusing on the subject of wishes and riddles (myths and rebuses) in Chinese art we explore this tendency to symbolize. During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1918) dynasties decorative objects depicting auspicious wishes were extremely popular. As Chi Jo-hsi, a Chinese art historian from Taiwan observed, "Everyone, from the emperor in his palace to the humblest citizen in his private dwelling, loved to surround himself with designs incorporating lucky symbols." Many symbols had ancient origins, particulary those referring to myths and legends and most of the ones depicting animals and plants. However, the use of an abundance of symbolism incorporating word play in the form of

rebuses was the particular contribution of the Ming and, especially, Qing artists. It was a natural outgrowth of the cultural tradition amassed over the centuries of China's history and the vast possibilties for punning presented by a language of many written characters but relatively few sounds.

While we can't know the exact meaning of the symbols which occur on neolithic pots and archaic bronzes, the designs project a haunting power. Traces of the world-view of the ancient Chinese is preserved there, and many have tried to codify what is seen. As we move up into the historical era with its greater breadth of cultural remains, including most particularly written records of all kinds, it is possible to interpret symbols with greater accuracy. During the later Zhou and Han dynasties, from about the 4th century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D., symbolism was concerned with cosmic diagrams bringing order to time and space; myths, such as that of the Queen Mother of the West; and idealized historical events bearing messages of political morality. It seems that whenever one scratches the surface of a decorative scheme, it turns out to mean more than was at first suspected. In the subtle, indirect language of symbolism much could be said that could not be plainly stated. At this time the line between reality and imagination was not so sharply drawn and symbols not only represented ideas but were also considered to be efficacious. Cosmic diagrams were used not only as symbols of cosmic order and the balance of forces in the universe, but also as implements to predict and control events.

With the breakdown of order at the collapse of the Han dynasty there arose a plethora of auspicious symbols used as omens

of good or bad fortune and as talismans for protection. These consisted of mythological beasts, rare plants and animals, and even freaks of nature. Some had existed earlier, such as the dragon, phoenix, and *qilin*, while others, such as birds or fish joined together and sharing a pair of wings or an eye, were new inventions.

Also during this time of civil strife and foreign invasion we see the wholesale importation of the Buddhist religion with its numerous gods and rich symbolism, such as the symbols of the lotus which grows up out of the mud, thus representing purity, and the cintamani, the wish-granting jewel. In time these were transformed. The lotus became a rebus (see below), and the jewel became the *ruyi* scepter meaning "May your wishes come true." The notion of groups of gods carrying or wearing attributes which identify them and indicate their particular powers enters China with this religion. The native Taoist religion borrowed the concept and created groups of their own gods, eventually producing, among others, the group of Eight Immortals with their attributes.

In the Tang dynasty (618-916) the symbolism and culture became more overtly secular and materialistic. Buddhist images are fleshed out and codified, while symbols of order return. It is on bronze mirrors, which were cast with ornate decoration, that we first see pairs of birds, fish, and plants used to symbolize harmony and devotion in marriage. This is a happy transformation of the auspicious symbols of the previous era. The forms are full and rounded and the decorative oranament luxuriously elegant.

Animals, birds, and insects, as well as all kinds of plants, always had a place in Chinese symbolism. In the Song dyanasty

(960-1280) there was a keen interest in gaining a deeper understanding of nature through close observation and truthful recording of what was seen. Artists carefully observed and depicted natural objects in a realistic style. They gave symbolic animals and plants a new life of their own while maintaining the overtones of meaning. While such mythological creatures as the dragon and phoenix continued to be important, now, as symbols of the emperor and empress, the preference was for more realistic animals, such as the crane and deer to symbolize longevity. Flowers were represented as symbols of the four seasons. Even the great artistic achievement of this era, ink landscape painting (known as *shanshuihua* or mountain-water painting), had symbolic implications. Although some symbols were discontinued under the foreign Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), many remained and were popular in abbreviated form on porcelains decorated in the new technique of blue underglaze designs.

Symbols which went underground during the Yuan dynasty were those having to do with Chinese national traditions and special holidays. While the usual round of festivals was officially curtailed, these feast days continued to be observed quietly and privately at home by all classes. Under the native rule of the following Ming dynasty the festivals were again celebrated at court as well as in the countryside. Emblems previously hidden within the folk culture became prominent and executed in the fine materials appropriate for the upper classes, embroidered on textiles, painted on fine porcelains, and carved into lacquerware and jade. Taoist symbols such as Xiwangmu, the Eight Immortals, and The Three Star Gods, as

well as legendary figures such as Zhong Kui (the Demon-queller) and Liu Hai, accompanied by his three-legged toad, were revived. Plant and animal symbols popular at this time include the peach, pomegranate, tiger, and Five Poisonous Animals.

It is also during the Ming dynasty that symbolism using a play on words was first systematically employed. Most designs with apparently arbitrary motifs turn out to be rebuses or pictorial puns. These riddles appear to have begun as part of the elaborate celebration of annual holidays. Emblems and symbols were designed to represent the particular focus of the festival One example of such a rebus is the Gourd of Great Good Fortune, the emblem of the New Year. It is often decorated with a large halberd because the words for "great good fortune" and "halberd" are puns in Chinese. From such simple beginnings rebuses became extremely complex. There can be rebuses within rebuses. Some individual symbolic rebuses in a given group may be read twice. Usually any one symbol has only one sound, but some like the lotus (which is by this time used more as a rebus than for its original Buddhist connotations of purity) can be pronounced two ways, *he* and *lian*. Although fashionable at the Ming and Qing courts, these rebuses could be understood even by illiterate observers. If they sounded out the words for the different objects depicted, they could hear the familiar auspicious phrases.

Many of the wishes depicted as rebuses were traditional invocations for good fortune. Most can be grouped into three main catergories: happiness, wealth, and long life. Each category is presided over by one of the Three Star Gods. Fuxing, God of Blessings and Happiness, is invoked for general good wishes but especially for

wishes regarding marriage and the birth of sons. Luxing, God of Wealth (actually the god of a good salary or emolument) presides over wishes for success in the official government examination, for rise in rank, and for an abundance of riches. Shouxing is the God of Longevity, even of Immortality. He is ancient himself and can be called upon with wishes for good health and long life. He carries the Peach of Immortality, which comes from the garden of Xiwangmu, Queen Mother of the West.

Xiwangmu's peach orchards flower once every 3000 years and in another 3000 years the peaches are ripe, at which time she invites the Eight Immortals and other gods to a banquet celebrating her birthday. There are many tales of her magical peaches and of immortals who achieved their status by stealing them. The most well-known thief was the mischievous monkey god, Su Wukong, who raided the orchard and literally crashed the party. His free-wheeling ideas and pranks were constantly disturbing the peace and tranquility of heaven, much to the gods' displeasure.

To summarize: we have seen how symbols have been a constant but changing aspect of Chinese art. They reflect the concerns and temper of the present as they borrow from and change symbols from the past while also creating new symbolic designs. In order to understand and decode these riddle-like symbols, one needs to have a familiarity with the traditional stories and images from China's long history, an appreciation of how symbols change through time, and a knowledge of the sound poor but image rich (the vast number of written characters) language. While all language is in essence symbolic, the Chinese can more easily "see" that theirs is.

From ancient to late dynasties there is a thread of belief that symbols can work magic, be it a cosmic diagram or a small talisman. Thus, the Chinese surround themselves with auspicious symbols for protection and to ensure that their wishes will come true.

One simple symbol can demonstrate how symbolic rebuses from the later dynasties echoed and incorporated symbols from the past. This is a rebus consisting of three kinds of fruit -- a peach, a pomegranate, and a Buddha's hand citron -- known collectively as *sanduo* or the "Three Plenties." The peach, as we have seen, is a longevity symbol which has been drawn from an ancient traditional legend. The pomegranate is a symbol of fertility. The symbolism here arises from its intrinsic nature, its many seeds. The citron shaped like a Buddha's hand with long curving fingers, has the name *foshou* which makes it a rebus for blessings and longevity. In this one symbol, then, we see embodied the long tradition and creative imagination of Chinese symbolic art.

Sanduo

Together they form the "Three Plenties," a wish for longevity and an abundance of blessings and offspring.

SLIDE DESCRIPTIONS

1. Baluster Vase, Design of Three Star Gods **B60 P1144**

Famille verte enamel on porcelain H: 44.6 cm
Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

Chinese artists created many symbols to ensure that one would get one's wish. The basic wishes in China for happiness, wealth, and long life are presided over by the Three Star Gods (Fuxing, Luxing, and Shouxing), whom you can see in this detail of the design on a porcelain vase. Fuxing, the God of Blessings and Happiness, is the gentleman on the left with his back to you. Perhaps he is holding a scroll in his hand, as he usually does. As the blessing of sons is one of his gifts, he is often accompanied by children. Here he is holding a child in his arms. You can just see the child's head over Fuxing's left shoulder. Luxing, God of Wealth and Rank, is depicted as a prosperous court official wearing richly embroidered robes and a hat of high rank. He carries his jade badge of office. Lastly, on the right, is Shouxing, God of Longevity. He can be recognized by his high bald head, full beard, and modest stature. His emblems are a staff with scroll attached and the peach of immortality, which here is represented magically enlarged.

2. Ruyi Scepter, Decorated with Lingzhi **B60 J483**

Jade L: 35.6 cm
Qing dynasty, 19th century

Wishes are so important that there is even a symbol which specifically means, "As you wish" or "May your wish come true." This is known as the *ruyi* scepter. A scepter is a ceremonial emblem of authority. *Ruyi* scepters like this one made of jade were often given as presents on special occasions, especially birthdays, and the symbols depicted on them help you guess for what kind of

celebration it was presented. This one is in the shape of a medicinal fungus, or *lingzhi*, and has smaller *lingzhi* embellishing it. This magic fungus was believed to bring long life, maybe even immortality, to anyone who ate it. As a gift, then, this scepter was probably a birthday present meaning "May you live long and may all your wishes come true." When *ruyi* scepters are depicted as part of other symbols, they bring hope that your wish for wealth, happiness, or whatever will come true. (Fig. 1)

3. **Circular Plaque with Bats and Coin** **86 J15**

Jade D: 5.1 cm

Qing dynasty, 19th century

Gift of R.W. Winskill in memory of Lionel H. Pries

This small jade plaque of bats surrounding a Chinese coin may seem like a strange sort of image. Why would someone want to show a bat and money? This is a rebus, a visual pun, and a favorite kind of symbol for the Chinese in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. The character for bat in Chinese is *fu*. However, another character also pronounced *fu* means "happiness" or "blessing" (remember the name of the God of Happiness was Fuxing or Blessing Star) so the artist will often use the image of a bat when he wants to make a symbol for happiness. Then what does the coin stand for? In this case it is not money but another rebus, since a pun on the word *qian* (money) also means "in front of"; the hole in the center of a Chinese coin is referred to as an "eye." Thus this unusual design is a kind of riddle which means "Blessings in front of your eyes," or "Blessings right here and now." (Fig. 2)

4. Twin Genii of Harmony and Mirth **B60 J109**

Jade H: 6.3 cm

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Wishes for happiness in marriage are symbolized in many ways. The Chinese word *xi*, meaning "happiness," is doubled as a marriage wish to the character *shuangxi* or "double happiness." (Fig. 3) In marriage happiness depends on harmony, so another wedding wish is for harmony, the word for which is *he* or *hehe*. The words for box and for lotus are also pronounced *he* and so become rebuses for marital accord. Holding a lotus (*he*) and a covered box (*he*) the two youthful gods in this slide are called the *hehe erxian*, or the twin genii of mirth and harmony. They are derived from the Buddhist gods Hanshan and Shide, two delightfully unkempt members of a temple of the Chan sect, who are shown in art carrying a fan and a broom and wearing large infectious grins. Their continued popularity and transformation tell us how important a sense of humor is, especially for marital harmony. (Fig. 4)

5. Mirror Case, Motif of Harmony and Everything to Your Wish **1988.10**

Embroidery on gauze silk L: 20.0 cm

Early 20th century

Gift of Katherine Ball

This silk mirror case is embroidered with designs bearing wishes for harmony and hope that all one's wishes come true. Can you find the lotus and the round covered box? Remember each is pronounced *he* , which when combined form a pun for *hehe* , meaning "to be harmonious." The lotus is shown with two flowers, a wiggly leaf, and a seed pod with four round seeds. This seed pod is already present in the flower when it is still a bud, making the plant an auspiscious marriage symbol, since it suggests a promise of children. The *ruyi* scepter is a little harder to spot. Look carefully.

Did anyone see it hiding behind the round box? The handle's pointed end sticks out below the box and is surrounded by three circles, while the head is above the box, curved back over the handle.

Another rebus here, woven into the background, multiplies the good wishes. The word *wan*, which means 10,000 or myriad, is represented by the swastika, which is also pronounced *wan*. (This motif came to China from India with the Buddhist religion. Swastika is a Sanskrit word and the symbol [卐] is an ancient one, meaning "good fortune" or "well-being.")

6. Snuff Bottle, Motif of Butterfly and Melon **B72 M40**

Amber H: 6.9 cm

Qing dynasty, ca. 19th century

In China melons, because of their many seeds, are appropriate symbols to express the wish for many sons. This golden-amber snuff bottle is in the shape of a melon. Trailing over its surface is the melon vine with leaves and flowers, and coming to visit one of the flowers is a bee-like butterfly. This combination [melon-butterfly] forms the rebus *gua-die* ("posterity") and *mianmian* meaning "continuous" (like a vine) or "everlasting." Thus the couplet *guadie mianmian*, a wish for ceaseless generations, is prettily suggested by a viney melon plant and butterfly. (Fig. 5)

Tobacco and the habit of taking snuff was introduced from the West to China and had become widespread by the early 17th century. While Europeans carried snuff in little boxes in their pockets, the Chinese, whose garments did not have pockets, kept their snuff in small bottles with corked stoppers which could be carried safely in pouches suspended from their belts. These bottles, which at first were made just from glass or porcelain, came to be created from a wide variety of precious materials, like this one of amber. Decorated with symbolic messages of all kinds, they made small elegant gifts.

7. **Table Cover, Design of 100 Boys** X71.42.2

Kesi tapestry (split silk), partly painted
Qing dynasty, 19th century
Gift of Katherine Ball

As we have already seen, the wish for children, especially sons, was of great importance to the Chinese. Many wedding presents were decorated with a theme of 100 boys. According to tradition, the 100 boys were the 99 natural sons and one adopted son of the wise and benevolent King Wen of Zhou, who ruled in the second half of the 12th century B.C.

The entire group is frequently illustrated on embroidered goods and the theme is suggested by small groups decorating ceramics and lacquers or depicted in paintings and tapestries. This slide shows a detail of an embroidered table cover on which all 100 can be found. The central figure is a boy dressed in auspicious red garments riding on the mythological beast called a *qilin*. In China, the *qilin*, is supposed to be the bringer of babies, like the stork in the West. In the boy's hand is a branch of sweet-smelling, golden-yellow flowers called *guihua* (sweet olive), a pun on the word *gui* meaning noble, thereby designating a wish for the birth of noble sons.

In a more complex rebus, an image of a boy carrying a branch of *guihua*, especially if there is an image of the moon present, can represent the phrase *changong zhegui* or "plucking a sweet olive branch from the moon palace," which is a poetic way of a saying "literary success and passing the civil service exams with high honors."

The boy on the *qilin* is a part of a small procession of boys carrying flags, books, and a gong, like an official returning home after passing the examinations. The rest of the 100 boys are playing games and carrying symbolic objects. All these have special meanings and often relate to the various festivities celebrating the holidays throughout the year.

8. **One of a Pair of Bowls with Boys Motif** **B60 P1445**

Green and yellow enamels on porcelain D:15 cm
Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period (1723-1735)

This porcelain bowl has a design of boys playing a typical boy's game of north China. It involves keeping a double weighted rod in the air, tossing and catching it with a small stick. Perhaps you have played such a game. Scenes like this are related to the theme of the 100 Boys and is meant to be a wish for many sons. The boys are well dressed and playing on the terrace of a Chinese mansion.

9. **Lock, Design of Peony and Inscription** **86 J17**

Jade H: 5.9 cm
Qing dynasty, 19th century
Gift of R.W. Winskill in memory of Lionel H. Pries

Along with wishes for the birth of a son come wishes for wealth and rank. The star god in charge of these wishes is Luxing. You may recall that he was the dignified official wearing a red robe and special hat in the painting on a porcelain vase which you saw in the first slide.

A flower symbolic of these wishes, besides the *guihua* you have already seen, is the tree peony, or *mudan*. Cultivated by royalty for many hundreds of years for its luxurious beauty, it became known as *fuguihua*, the "flower of wealth and rank." (Fig. 6a) It is a very popular motif in Chinese art. When it is combined with magnolia, *yulan* (Fig. 6b), a pun for "jade" (*yu*), and crab apple blossoms, *haitang* (Fig. 6c), a pun for "hall" (*tang*), they form the rebus, *yutang fugui* or "wealth and rank in the jade hall." This implies not only prosperity but also scholarly achievement.

Government officials were the most important and wealthy members of society, and they achieved their postition by passing the difficult civil service examinations. Parents encouraged their children to excel in their studies so they would have a chance to pass

these examinations and rise to high levels in the government. The "Jade Hall" refers to the Hanlin Academy which was the official bureau made up of the scholars who had attained the highest literary degrees.

This lock is a kind good luck charm presented to a baby boy to "lock" him to earth so he would not die but live to achieve high honors. On one side is the picture of the peony, flower of wealth and rank, and on the other side is an inscription of the couplet *yutang fugui*, written in the ancient seal style of script, underscoring its scholarly connotation. (Fig. 7)

10. **Horse and Monkeys** **B64 J5**

Jade H: 7.4 cm

Ming dynasty, 14th-17th century

Once one had passed the examinations and gained an official position, it was important to seek advancement in rank. This sculptural grouping carved from a jade stone depicts a rebus about advancement. It is also a charming little composition of monkeys and a horse. The word for monkey is *hou* which is also the word for marquis, a high court rank. *Ma* means horse and *shang* can mean "up" or "on top of," but *mashang* together also means "immediately." So, looking at the image, the phrase *mashang fenghou* seems to describe a monkey on a horse, with a bee (*feng*) on the horse's shoulder, but also can be read "May you be elevated to the rank of marquis (*fenghou*) immediately (*mashang*)."

The artists who made these objects which incorporate symbolic wishes also took care to create interesting and attractive artistic compositions. For instance, the rebus depicted here needs only one monkey, but the composition was more lively with two. It is quite possible that a non-Chinese collector considering buying such a piece would not know what it meant but still be drawn to the images, the quality of the stone, and the carving.

11. **Snuff Bottle, Design of Fish and Lotus Leaf** **B76 M29**

White glass with green overlay H: 7 cm

Qing dynasty, 19th century

When one wishes for wealth in China, that wish doesn't always include the notion of scholarly achievement or official rank. Some symbols refer only to money or gold. One such symbol is the fish (*yu*), a rebus for *yu*, "abundance." Two fish stand for "double abundance." The image of a gold fish (*jinyu*) can be read as "an abudance of gold." The gold fish on this glass snuff bottle is pictured wrapped (*bao*) in a large lotus (*he*) leaf, which adds another element to the rebus. Now it reads *hebao jinyu*, or "an abundance of money in one's purse (*hebao*)."

12. **Liu Hai, Attendant and Toad** **B60 S72**

Ivory H: 27.3 cm

Late Ming, 17th century

Liu Hai, a Taoist immortal, and his three-legged toad are also symbolic of wealth. What a different sort of figure he is than the dignified Luxing! Although Liu Hai was once an important minister of state, he gave up that life and became a wandering Taoist seeking not riches but the elxir of immortality. In his wanderings he is accompanied by the magical toad who serves as his vehicle, carrying him instantaneously over vast distances. However, the toad tires of this airborn travel and disappears down wells whenever he can. How does Liu Hai get him back? He uses his attribute, a string of cash, consisting of several round coins strung together through their square holes on a multicolored ribbon. The toad has a passion for money and gold and so can always be lured out by the dangling cash.

This image of Liu Hai, his toad, and an attendant is carved out of ivory. It depicts the god in a typical pose, dancing and dangling his string of cash in front of the three-legged toad. The cheery elf-like attendant is keeping time with his clappers to Liu Hai's dance

and carrying on his back a double gourd of medicinal herbs and potions, whose fumes rise in misty swirls above his shoulder.

13. **Stem Cup Decorated with Shou Characters** **85 P5**
Gold and Blue enamel on porcelain H: 10.2 cm
Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period (1723-1735)
Gift of Rudolph Schaeffer in memory of Ching-wah Lee

Along with wishes for happiness and prosperity, the third kind of wish often made in China is for long life. This cup with a tall base, called a stem cup, is decorated with the Chinese character *shou* or "long life." This word is so popular and used so often as a decorative motif that many ways of writing it have been devised; 100 of them are used on this piece. *Shou* is most often employed as part of a birthday greeting, wishing someone many more birthdays to come, but it is appropriate for many other occasions. A San Francisco designer and collector donated this cup to the museum when he was 100 years old, after which he lived several more years. It seems to have been a good omen for him. (Fig. 8)

14. **Shouxing with Bat and Deer** **B60 J272**
Jade H: 20.3 cm
Qing dynasty, 18th century

The star god who presides over wishes for long life is Shouxing. Remember him from the first slide? He was the old man with a flowing beard and high bald head who carried a staff and had a huge magic peach. This jade carving shows him with his dragon-headed staff and dangling scroll propped behind him while he holds with both hands the peach of immortality.

The deer lying in front of the god can have a double meaning. From ancient times the deer was a symbol of immortality because the Chinese believed that it was able to find the *lingzhi* fungus and thus live a long time. That's one meaning. The deer (*lu*) is also a

rebus for Luxing, the god of wealth. Can you find the third star god, Fuxing, the god of happiness? What animal was a rebus for "happiness" or "blessings"? You have probably already found the bat (*fu*) perched on the god's left shoulder.

15. **Gathering of Immortals at Yaochi, detail of He Xiangu** **B62 D28**

Kesi tapestry (slit silk), partly painted H: 182.8 cm
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736-1795)

There are many immortals in Chinese mythology. Besides Liu Hai, whom we have already met, and Shouxing himself, there is the popular group of Eight Immortals. Eight is an important symbolic number to the Chinese with auspicious connotations. These Eight Immortals are Taoist deities. Once ordinary human beings, they had experiences which changed their lives and in one way or another became immortal.

In this detail from a large tapestry hanging you can see the one female immortal in this group, He Xiangu. She is identified by the lotus she carries, the flower of open-heartedness. She also sometimes holds the peach of immortality given her in her youth by the immortal Lu Dongbin as a symbol of her immortal identity.

He Xiangu lived at the time of the Empress Wu (A.D. 684-705). From childhood she played apart from other children and went roaming in the mountains. One time she found a stone called Yunmushih (mother-of-pearl). A spirit came to her in a dream and told her if she ground to powder and ate some of this stone, she would become immortal and be able to travel effortlessly and quickly anywhere. She did so and spent her days going from peak to peak, picking special fruits and plants which she brought home to her mother. She gradually realized that she did not have to eat to live.

One day the empress, who had heard of He Xiangu's fame, sent for her. Along the way the girl just disappeared from human sight and became an immortal. It is said that she has reappeared from time to time in later centuries.

Here she is depicted with her lotus in one hand and a *lingzhi* fungus in the other. A crane, another symbol of long life, approaches on the right. A small monkey sits on the lotus holding a peach. This could be the monkey god, Sun Wukong, who had become immortal by stealing the magic peaches from the garden of Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, and wrecking her special birthday banquet for the other immortals.

16. **One of a Pair of Plates,** **B60 P1708**
Motif of Bats and Peaches
Famille rose enamel on porcelain D: 20.7 cm
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736-1795)

The decoration on this plate is a rebus. To decode the riddle, it is necessary to include the decoration on the back side. This consists of three more peaches and two bats. By now you know that bats and peaches are symbols for long life and happiness, but this decoration is also an example of the Chinese love of number groupings. The eight peaches stand for the Eight Immortals, the five bats for the Five Happinesses.

Eight is considered a particularly auspicious number. It is an even or feminine *yin* number, which in the balance of things rules a man's cycles of growth and completion. There are many groupings of eight; such as, the eight trigrams, the eight precious things, and the eight Buddhist symbols.

The number five is also important in Chinese thought. There are the five directions (the four points of the compass and the middle), and much of Chinese medicine and philosophy is based on the theory of the five elements. Here the five bats stand for the Five Blessings: long life, riches, health, love of virtue, and a natural death.

Red bats are especially auspicious, not only because the color red wards off demons but also because *hong*, the Chinese word for red, is a rebus for *hong* "enormous."

17. **Bowl with Emblems of the Eight Immortals** **B70 P38**

Doucai enamel on porcelain D: 13.4 cm

Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period (1723-1735)

Symbols for the immortals which are more specific than peaches are the things that they carry for identification, their attributes. These may indicate their former occupations and are implements for performing magic. For instance, He Xiangu carries the lotus flower given to her by the immortal Lu Dongbin for identification. He himself is known by his magic sword and fly whisk. The sword represents his excellence at fencing and also enables him to disappear at will. The horsehair fly-whisk is a Taoist symbol of being able to fly through the air and walk on the clouds of heaven. When the immortal's attributes are used as a decorative motif, they are known as the "Hidden Eight Immortals." (Fig. 9)

This lovely, thin, white, porcelain bowl is embellished with the "Hidden Eight Immortals." The three that you can see are the flower basket of Lan Caihe, patron god of florists; the flute of the youthful Han Xianzi, patron of music; and the castanets of Cao Guojiu, the only nobleman of the group and patron of the theatrical profession. The others to be found encircling the bowl are a fan, a bamboo fish drum with metal beaters, the lotus, the sword and fly whisk, and a double gourd with iron crutch. What do you think would be the most appropriate symbol to put in the middle of the interior of the bowl? Do you agree with the artist's choice of the peach?

18. **Cat and Butterfly on Leaves** **B60 J437**

Jade H: 8.6 cm

Qing dynasty, 18th century

This jade carving also represents a wish for long life. It depicts a cat and butterflies on some leaves. The cat (*mao*) is a rebus for 70-80 years old, and the butterfly (*die*) is homophonous with *die* meaning aged 80. The implied wish is "May you live to be 70 or 80."

19. **Zhong Kui Riding a Mule** **82 D2**

Ink and Color on Paper H: 91.5 cm
Pu Ru (1896-1963) painted before 1941
John W. and Christine C. Barr Gift Fund

There are many seasonal festivals in China. One of the most important is celebrated on the 5th day of the 5th month, the summer solstice. At this time of year the negative *yin* forces are supposed to be at their stongest. Charms and amulets needed to ward off evil typically incorporated things associated with the *yang* principle; for example, anything colored red or spiked-leaved plants. But most powerful for exorcising the demons who represented the evil forces of the *yin* principle was the image of Zhong Kui, the Demon-queller. In this hanging scroll (painted by the cousin of the last emperor of China, Pu Yi) Zhong Kui is depicted in red robes riding a mule and followed by his own demon entourage.

Zhong Kui, the Demon-queller, was in real life a tragic hero of the 8th century. He was a brilliant scholar who had gone to the capital to take the government examinations. He passed with the highest score. By all rights this should have assured him an important post in the government, but because he was also an extremely ugly man, the emperor dimissed him from the court. He was so frustrated and humiliated he took his own life on the steps of the Imperial Palace.

That night the emperor had a nightmare in which he was being attacked by demons. Zhong Kui appeared and chased the demons away. On waking the Emperor was full of remorse for his actions and posthumously restored Zhong Kui to full honors and gave him the title of "Demon-queller."

This festival is also known as the Dragon Boat Festival and is celebrated by special boat races, throwing food into the river for the fish, and eating special foods such as sweet rice, meat, and seeds wrapped in leaves. This celebration commemorates the death of Qu Yuan, a poet and statesman who lived in the 4th-3rd centuries B.C.

and who drowned himself in the river to protest corruption at high levels of government.

20. **Tiger and the Five Poisonous Animals** **B60 J352**
Jade L: 10.8 cm
Late Ming/Early Qing dynasties, 17th century

It is also important on the 5th-day-of-the-5th-month festival to protect against the Five Poisons (*wudu*) represented by the snake, scorpion, centipede, spider, and toad. Sometimes one of them is replaced by the lizard. Following the Chinese belief in the effectiveness of fighting poison with poison, amulets with depictions of these pernicious creatures are worn to ward off their danger.

The tiger is also able to combat the Five Poisons. This jade sculpture depicts a tiger with the poisonous creatures. He holds the toad down with his paw while the others are crawling on his body. The piece serves as a charm against their evil influence. (Fig. 10)

SLIDE LIST

1. **Baluster Vase, Design of Three Star Gods** **B60 P1144**
   Famille verte enamel on porcelain H: 44.6 cm
   Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

2. **Ruyi Scepter, Decorated with Lingzhi** **B60 J483**
   Jade L: 35.6 cm
   Qing dynasty, 19th century

3. **Circular Plaque with Bats and Coin** **86 J15**
   Jade D: 5.1 cm
   Qing dynasty, 19th century
   Gift of R.W. Winskill in memory of Lionel H. Pries

4. **Twin Genii of Harmony and Mirth** **B60 J109**
   Jade H: 6.3 cm
   Qing dynasty, 18th century

5. **Mirror Case, Motif of Harmony and Everything to Your Wish** **1988.10**
   Embroidery on gauze silk L: 20.0 cm
   Early 20th century
   Gift of Katherine Ball

6. **Snuff Bottle, Motif of Butterfly and Melon** **B72 M40**
   Amber H: 6.9 cm
   Qing dynasty, ca. 19th century

1989.11 [redacted]

7. **Table Cover, Design of 100 Boys**
   Kesi tapestry (split silk), partly painted
   Qing dynasty, 19th century
   Gift of Katherine Ball

8. **One of a Pair of Bowls with Boys Motif** **B60 P1445**
   Green and yellow enamels on porcelain D: 15 cm
   Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period (1723-1735)

9. **Lock, Design of Peony and Inscription** **86 J17**
   Jade H: 5.9 cm
   Qing dynasty, 19th century
   Gift of R.W. Winskill in memory of Lionel H. Pries

10. **Horse and Monkeys** **B64 J5**
Jade H: 7.4 cm
Ming dynasty, 14th-17th century

11. **Snuff Bottle, Design of Fish and Lotus Leaf** **B76 M29**
White glass with green overlay H: 7 cm
Qing dynasty, 19th century

12. **Liu Hai, Attendant and Toad** **B60 S72**
Ivory H: 27.3 cm
Late Ming, 17th century

13. **Stem Cup Decorated with Shou Characters** **85 P5**
Gold and Blue enamel on porcelain H: 10.2 cm
Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period (1723-1735)
Gift of Rudolph Schaeffer in memory of Ching-wah Lee

14. **Shouxing with Bat and Deer** **B60 J272**
Jade H: 20.3 cm
Qing dynasty, 18th century

15. **Gathering of Immortals at Yaochi, detail of He Xiang** **B62 D28**
Kesi tapestry (slit silk), partly painted H: 182.8 cm
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736-1795)

16. **One of a Pair of Plates, Motif of Bats and Peaches** **B60 P1708**
Famille rose enamel on porcelain D: 20.7 cm
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736-1795)

17. **Bowl with Emblems of the Eight Immortals** **B70 P38**
Doucai enamel on porcelain D: 13.4 cm
Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period (1723-1735)

18. **Cat and Butterfly on Leaves** **B60 J437**
Jade H: 8.6 cm
Qing dynasty, 18th century

19. **Zhong Kui Riding a Mule** **82 D2**
Ink and Color on Paper H: 91.5 cm
Pu Ru (1896-1963) painted before 1941
John W. and Christine C. Barr Gift Fund

20. **Tiger and the Five Poisonous Animals** **B60 J352**
Jade L: 10.8 cm
Late Ming/Early Qing dynasties, 17th century

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The Gods of Longevity

The Kesi *(slit silk) tapestry depicts the 'Peach Banquet' held at Yaochi, Xiwangmu's dwelling high in the Kunlun Mountains, where immortals are invited to attend and partake of the fruit of immortality. Such pictures are often presented as birthday gifts.*

---

1 ***Xiwangmu,*** Queen Mother of the West, is the keeper of magic peach trees which bloom every three thousand years and take another three thousand years for the fruit to ripen. She is riding on a phoenix with female attendants on either side.

The Three Star Gods are the most popular deities in Chinese folk culture. They represent what people most wish in life.

2 *Fuxing* is the God of Blessings or Happiness.

3 *Luxing,* the God of Rank and Emolument, appears as an official on his way to the court; he wears a robe of brocade and a jade-encrusted belt.

4 *Shouxing,* God of Longevity, is a benevolent old gentleman with a prominent cranium; he holds a staff and the peach of immortality.

The Eight Immortals were people from various walks of life who attained immortality by absorbing the Elixir of Life. They are worshipped as gods of longevity.

5 *Zhongli Chuan,* leader of the Eight, represents the military man. He is usually shown holding a fan which revives the dead.

6 *Lu Dongbin,* patron saint of barbers, holds a fly whisk and a sword with which he can perform great feats of magic.

7 *Lan Caihe,* the strolling singer, carries a basket of flowers and is the patron deity of florists.

8 *Cao Guojiu,* patron deity of actors, is the only nobleman among the group. He is said to be connected with the Song Imperial family and is represented with castanets or a jade tablet of admission to court.

9 *Zhang Guolao,* the symbol of old age, carries a fish drum and metal beaters.

10 *He Xiangu,* a young woman holding a lotus blossom, lived in the late 7th century. She is the Chinese Cinderella whom the immortals rescued from her wicked stepmother.

11 *Han Xiangzi,* nephew of Tang dynasty statesman and scholar Han Yu, is often shown playing a flute.

12 *Li Tieguai,* the Iron-crutch, has a double gourd filled with magic drugs to relieve pain and distress. He was once a handsome young man but took on this crippled form when his own body was mistakenly burned by a disciple.

GATHERING OF IMMORTALS AT YAOCHI Kesi tapestry
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1798). H: 182.8 cm: 62 D28

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PUNS AND REBUSES

The Chinese language has relatively few sounds for a large number of written characters, so the opportunities for punning are extraordinarily great. This has encouraged the use of puns and rebuses for poetic and symbolic expression. English also has this possibility. These exercises provide an opportunity to play with English puns and rebuses.

A PUN is a play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word and sometimes on a similar or exact sound of different words.
e.g. puns on the same word: bowl, bat, perch, flatter
puns on different words: deer/dear, I/eye, knight/night

1. Ask students to come up with as many puns as they can in an allotted period of time.

2. Have them write sentences using pairs of puns: their own, another student's, or ones selected by the teacher for the whole class. Encourage originality, effectiveness, and humor.

PUNS can be made up of words of two or more syllables matched with a phrase of one-syllable words; e.g. appeal/a peel, ingratiate/in gray she ate.

3. Have students collect these over a period of time to see how many the class can find.

4. Have students write these puns using as many pictorial rebuses as possible and then pass the rebus on to another student to decode.

A REBUS is a riddle composed of words or syllables depicted by symbols or pictures that suggest the sound of the words or syllables they represent.

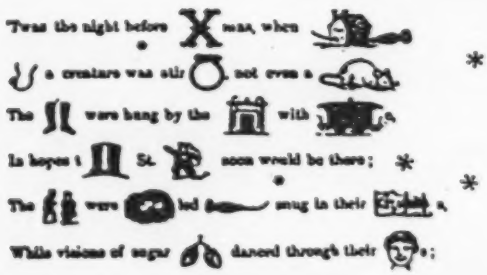
5. Select puns where one word is easily pictured. Create phrases where a picture can be a rebus for the other word in the pun.
Example: It's not polite to

6. Try making phrases or sentences with more than one rebus.
Example: symbol/cymbal, to/two, present/present

Rebuses use 2 re- the sounds of words.

7. Select a passage from something the students are reading. Ask them to write it out replacing words with pictures or numbers where possible. Sometimes just part of a word can suggest a picture with the rest spelled out in letters.

Example (taken from the American Heritage Dictionary): A writing of the first lines of "T'was the Night Before Christmas" with rebuses.



8. Have students write words or short phrases using only letters and numbers as symbols for words or parts of words.

Examples: What the old woman said
to her bare cupboard.....O I C U R M-T
Old English rhyme rebus.....YY U R, YY U B
I C U R YY 4 me.
From Steig's C D B.....I M N D L-F-8-R
(many of these are found on license plates)

There is a form of rebus which uses one word in place of another word but is not an exact pun or homonym. These words(symbols) are only somewhat similar in sound, very dissimilar in meaning, and disarmingly humorous in sequence. In order to decode this kind of rebus it is a helpful to read it aloud in order to hear the similarities in sound. The following example is a sentence from a retelling of the story of Little Red Riding Hood in this rebus form. It is called "Ladle Rat Rotten Hut" (The full version is available locally at the Exploratorium store or in the MAPS book Signs and Symbol)

Wants pawn tern, dare worsted ladle gull hoe lift wetter murder
Once upon a time there was a little girl who lived with her mother

inner ladle cordage honor itch offer lodge dock flourish.
in a little cottage on the edge of a large dark forest.

SYMBOLISM

Chinese art is rich in symbolism. Some of their symbols refer to legends and myths, some employ plants and animals for their special qualities, and others are generated by word play in the form of rebuses.

A SYMBOL is something which stands for something else, but ususally not just one thing. It has more than one level of meaning, and so helps us expand our minds and imaginations. Mankind has used symbols to express ideas that are hard to put into words. Art is symbolic; it expresses more than it depicts. Cultures also use symbols to designate different ideas and wishes associated with their holidays and special occasions.

This activity invites students to explore the use of symbols in their culture. After looking at the slides of Chinese symbols for good wishes, note the similarities and differences in the way each culture makes wishes for good fortune on holidays and special occasions.

1. Have a class discussion about ways the students celebrate special occasions and annual holidays.

2. What traditional symbols are used to convey the idea of appropriate wishes for the occasion?
   (e.g. birthday cakes, jack-o-lanterns, hearts, candles, etc.)

3. Make a chart or calendar with symbols for all the holidays represented by students in the class.

4. Talk about the special foods which are eaten for different holidays.
   Do they have a seasonal significance?
   Is there a story behind them?

5. Ask the students to do research at home and in the library and then write a few paragraphs about the symbolism of food.

6. Discuss symbolism in clothes.
   What kinds of clothes have specific symbolic significance?
   (e.g. hats, uniforms, etc.)
   Are there times you wear special clothes? What does it mean?

REBUSES FOUND IN THE SLIDES

word(s)	character(s)	rebuses, or visual puns	
ruyi	如意	scepter	slide 2
		may your wishes come true	
fu	蝠	bat	slide 3
	福	blessing, happiness	
qian	錢	coin	
	前	in front of, before	
he	荷	lotus	slide 4
	盒	box	
hehe	和合	accord, harmony	
wan	[卍]	swastika	slide 5
	萬	10,000	
gua	瓜	melon	slide 6
die	蝶	butterfly	
guadie	瓜瓞	big melon, little melon (posterity)	
mianmian	綿綿	everlasting, continuous (like a vine)	
guihua	桂花	sweet olive flower	slide 7
gui	貴	noble, rank	
fuguihua	富貴花	flower of wealth and rank, (peony)	slide 9
yulan	玉蘭	magnolia	
yu	玉	jade	
haitang	海棠	crabapple	
tang	堂	hall	
yutang fugui	玉堂富貴	"wealth and rank in the jade hall"	

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hou	猴	**monkey**	slide 10
	侯	marquis	
feng	蜂	**bee**	
fenghou	封侯	to be elevated to feudal lord, marquis	
ma	馬	**horse**	
shang	上	above, on top of	
mashang	馬上	immediately	
yu	魚	**fish**	slide 11
	餘	abundance	
jin	金	gold	
jinyu	金魚	**goldfish**	
	金餘	gold in abundance	
he	荷	**lotus leaf**	
bao	包	wrapped	
hebao	荷包	purse	
lu	鹿	**deer**	slide 14
	祿	wealth, as in Luxing, God of Wealth	
mao	貓	**cat**	slide 18
	耄	70-80 years old	
die	蝶	**butterfly**	
die	耋	aged, 80 years old	
maodie	耄耋	an auspicious term meaning longevity	

OTHER SYMBOLS FOUND IN THE SLIDES

shou	long life	slide 13
peaches	symbols of immortality	slides14-16
five bats	the Five Blessings	slide 16
eight peaches	the Eight Immortals	
the attributes of the Eight Immortals	the Hidden Eight Immortas	slide 17
five poisonous animals	the "Five Poisons"	slide 20
tiger	symbol of strength	slide 20

Words in **bold** typeface indicate **images** found in the **art objects.**

fig. 1 *Ruyi* scepter and *lingzhi* fungus
"May all your wishes come true" and "May you live long"

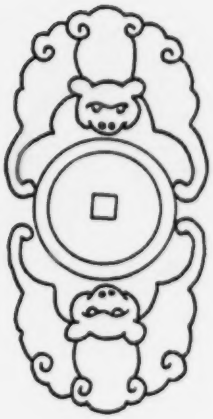

fig. 2 Bats and coin, *fuzai yanqian*
"Blessings in front of your eyes"

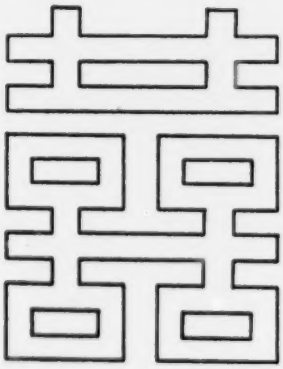

fig. 3 Double *xi*, *shuangxi*,
"double happiness"

fig. 4 Lotus,box, and fungus *hehe ruyi*
"May you have a harmonious marriage and may your wishes come true"

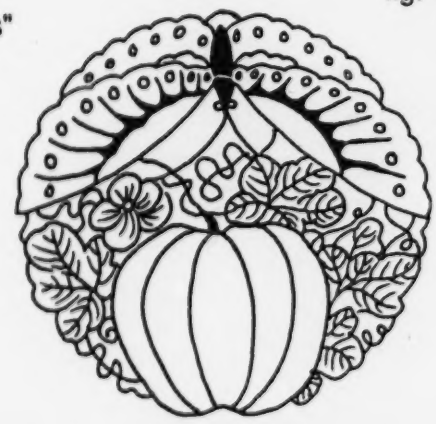

fig. 5 Melon and butterfly. *guadie mianmian.*
"May you have numerous descendants"

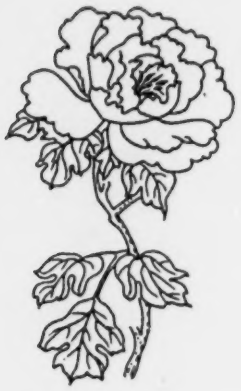

fig. 6a Peony. *fuguihua.*
"flower of wealth and rank"

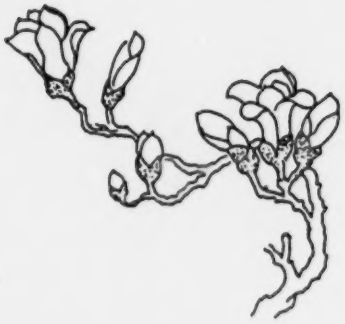

fig. 6b Magnolia. *yulan.*

fig. 6c Crabapple. *haitang*

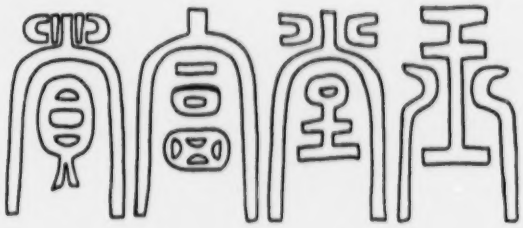

fig. 7 Inscription from jade lock. *yulan fugui*
"wealth and rank in the jade hall"

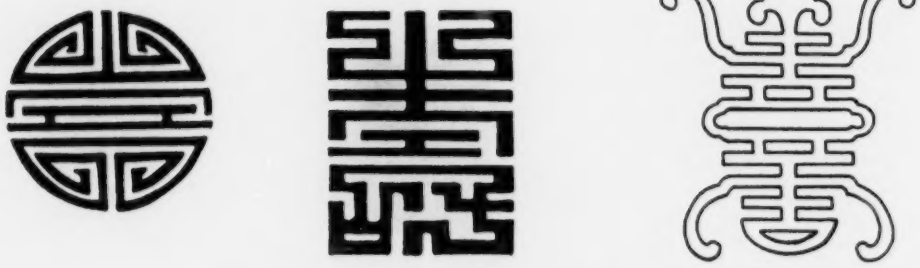

fig. 8. *Shou.* long life (three decorative styles)

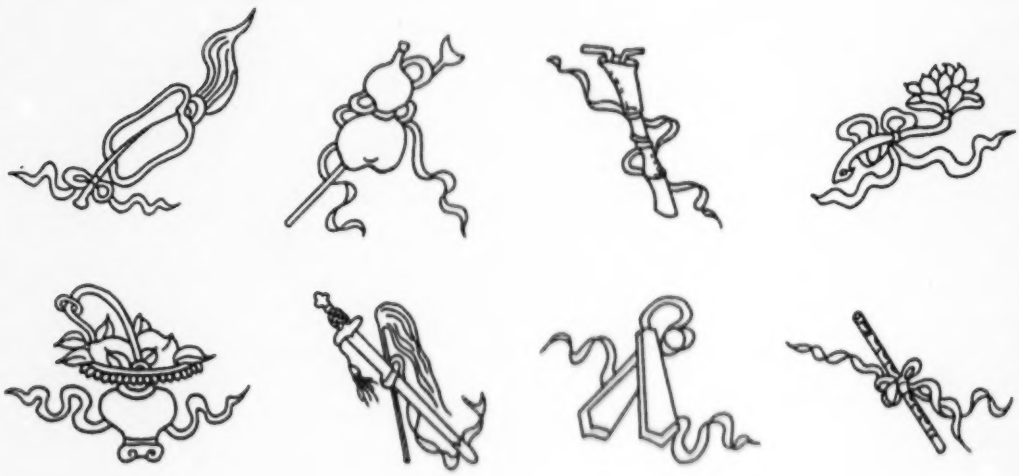

fig. 9 Attributes of the Eight Immortals:
fan, double gourd and iron crutch, bamboo fish drum, lotus, flower basket, sword and fly whisk, castanets, and flute.

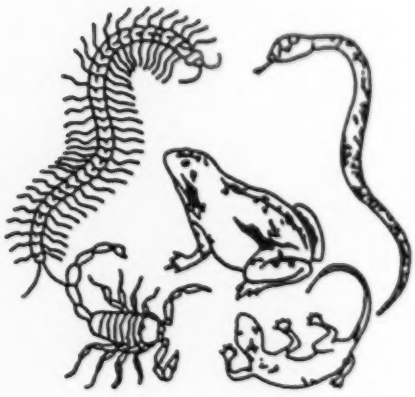

fig. 10 The Five Poisons: viper, lizard, scorpion centipede, and toad,

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